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ABSTRACT

Although listening comprehension has been identified as the first and most important foreign language skill, research has shown that little class time is devoted to developing more than very basic listening skills. Early practice in listening in a foreign language helps to develop both language skills and confidence in communicating in the target language. The objective of instruction for listening comprehension should be to help students overcome the tendency to panic over lost portions of a message and to get the main idea. One way to increase listening effectiveness is to provide students with advance information about what they will be hearing, such as simple introductory statements, background information, key vocabulary, excerpts, and comprehension questions. Class activities can be geared toward developing listening skills when they are followed by comprehension questions. Some such activities are: presentations by the teacher or guest speakers, an audio-motor unit using a set of taped statements that the teacher and then the students pantomime, and show-and-tell and its variations. Students can also be encouraged to develop their skill by being taught appropriate ways of asking questions, especially when the input begins to become incomprehensible. Because commercially prepared materials accompanying texts do not generally address listening skills, it is the teachers' responsibility to do so. (MSE)

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3 Listening: What's Really Going on in the Classroom?

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Listening comprehension has been the focus of several recent articles in second language journals. In spite of the attention in professional literature and the good intentions of classroom teachers, students continue to perceive listening comprehension as their weakest skill. But are we really teaching our students to be good listeners or are we hoping that this essential skill will develop on its own? This article will elaborate some of the reasons for the current low levels of listening proficiency in our students and suggest some strategies and techniques for improving the situation.

The Literature

Listening comprehension has been identified as the first (chronologically) and most important language skill. Many prominent second language educators (Byrnes, 3; Krashen and Terrell, 8; Winitz, 14) feel that comprehension logically precedes production and that no production can take place unless listening competence is built up through comprehending linguistic input. Krashen (8) has defined comprehensible input as speech that contains understandable messages and forms slightly beyond the learners' actual level of competence.

Research in listening spans the past five decades (Devine, 4), yet there is little consensus on what actually occurs during the comprehension process. Obviously, one of the main reasons for the lack of accord is the fact that listening is not a readily observable skill like speaking, writing, or even

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reading. It has, at times, been called a passive skill, although I prefer the term *receptive*. A process that converts sound waves to meaning in the brain implies an active, not a passive, skill. Richards (13) has drawn from native language research in speech act theory to provide us with a theory of the processes involved in second language listening comprehension, which includes the following:

1. The type of interactional act or speech event in which the listener is involved is determined (conversation, lecture, discussion, debate, etc.).
2. Scripts relevant to the particular situation are recalled (e.g., a visit to the dentist).
3. The speaker's goals are inferred through reference to the situation, script, and sequential position of the utterance.
4. Propositional meaning (the basic units of meaning involved in comprehension) of the utterance is determined.
5. Illocutionary meaning (determining the speaker's intention) is assigned to the message.
6. Information is retained and acted upon; the form in which it was originally received is deleted.

The Reality

Early in 1985, beginning Spanish classes were studied in order to find out what kinds of learning activities were being presented, to what extent students were engaging in those activities, and how the instructors were managing the classes.[1] Six different instructors were involved in the study; half were native speakers of Spanish and half were non-native speakers. Teaching experience ranged from two to seven years. The Observational System for Instructional Analysis (Hough, 5) was used to code classroom behaviors of students and instructors. (See Table 1.)

The results show that listening activities accounted for only .02 of total classroom time, while grammar activities constituted about .56. Vocabulary, which contributes heavily to listening comprehension, accounted for only another .07 of the total observed time. A further and more distributing analysis of the data reveals that five of the instructors did not include a single developmental listening activity in their lesson

Table 1
Observed Learning Activities

Type of Activity	*Proportion to Total Instructional Time*
Listening	.02
Speaking	.13
Reading	.07
Writing	.00
Grammar	.56
Culture	.07
Vocabulary	.07
Other*	.08
Total	1.00

*Includes classroom management and review for quizzes and tests

plans. Did the students enrolled in these classes listen to the target language at all? The results shown in Table 1 include only those activities that were intended specifically for the development and practice of listening skills. Of course, students actually did hear some target language input. Teacher talk accounted for .58 of total classroom time, while student talk accounted for .28. Silence made up the remaining .14 of total instructional time. Target language input comprised .22 of all teacher talk. Interestingly, student target language output came to .23 of total classroom time.

What was the target language input like? The data reveal that teacher questions comprised the bulk of target language input. It is not surprising, then, that student answers to those questions formed the largest category of target language output. Presumably, students who were not answering questions were listening to their classmates' answers—another source of Spanish input.

Were these students proficient listeners? According to the descriptions of the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines (1) for listening, most would be ranked at the Novice level. They may recognize interrogative forms and key vocabulary items that enable them to provide responses to teacher questions about grammar, dialogues, and other textbook exercises, but the majority were not proficient at understanding connected

discourse and conversation. Although the sample for this study was small and confined to one university, it conforms with results obtained in similar studies (Nerenz, 12; Long, 9).

Why Teach Listening?

Many second language teachers have asked why so much emphasis should be placed on listening comprehension. The vast majority of our students will not travel abroad nor come in contact with native speakers in their own cities. They have little opportunity beyond the classroom to use their language skills. Yet many of the same teachers who question the place of listening practice often stress oral communication in their classes. Teaching only the productive aspect of communication is like teaching half the process. In order for true communication to take place, there must be a sender and a receiver who comprehends the message—and proficient communicators must be able to play both roles. Needless to say, I do not advocate the elimination of speaking practice, nor of grammar, from the curriculum. What we as teachers must do is allocate time for learning activities in a more logical manner, emphasizing listening and vocabulary more at the early stages of second language acquisition. In addition to rounding out the communication process, the ability to comprehend spoken language gives students a sense of confidence and control over the language that knowledge of grammar rules does not.

What Kinds of Practice?

Belasco provides further insight on how to achieve listening competence: "In order to understand the spoken language at an effective level, it is absolutely essential for one to be trained to listen at that level. This means spending a lot of time listening to what native speakers listen to. Contrived materials must be generously . . . supplemented by 'live' materials" (2, p. 18). This section will focus on some types of "live" materials that are effective for use with beginning and intermediate language learners. Before embarking on a campaign to improve students' listening skills, it is important to remember that total comprehension in all situations is impossible to achieve even in one's native language. Part of the problem is due to the open-ended nature of vocabulary; we can never completely

master the vocabulary of any language. In addition, second language learners' listening proficiency is affected by factors that do not inhibit native speakers. Limited vocabulary, lack of scripts, rapidity of speech, and tenseness, for example, may render students unable to chunk speech into meaningful segments. Our goal, therefore, should be to help students overcome the tendency to panic over the individual parts of a message and lose their train of thought. As Krashen says, they must learn to go for the meaning rather than word-for-word translations. Getting the main idea is the point of listening comprehension.

Advance Organizers

When teaching beginners and intermediate language learners, we must help them get organized for effective listening. Providing students with some advance information on what they will be hearing can often help them focus on the main ideas instead of individual words. This technique is often essential when using taped materials. The organizer can be a simple statement or it can be more detailed. Many types of advance organizers, such as the following, can be used both for listening and reading activities.[2]

Simple introductory statements. "You will hear two French students, Véronique and Chantal, discussing their favorite activities," or "Elinora is giving her professor an excuse for not doing her project."

Background information. In an intermediate class, give a short presentation on the life, types of subject matter, and images used by a songwriter or poet before playing or reading a sample work.

Key vocabulary. A short list of key vocabulary items is often an effective advance organizer because it removes stumbling blocks to comprehension.

Excerpts. Used as advance organizers, excerpts from the listening passage can pique the curiosity enough to get students to pay close attention to the details that follow.

Comprehension questions. Finally, a set of comprehension questions given prior to the listening activity helps students focus on the main idea. Depending on the types of questions used, this exercise can help students develop the ability to listen for details, as well as for the main idea. Students should study the questions in advance but not try to write the answers during the presentation itself.

Demonstrations

Beginners are able to pick up a great deal of vocabulary and gain confidence in listening comprehension from watching and listening to demonstrations by their teachers or guest presenters. While structures need not be rigidly controlled (one can use past or future tenses if their meaning is visually obvious) the use of cognates and familiar vocabulary provide at the same time reinforcement of previous materials and good materials for developing listening skills. The following are the three main steps for any demonstration:

1. The presentation (telling the story).
2. Rephrasing the presentation.
3. Checking students' comprehension.

When giving demonstrations, it is helpful to use props, pictures, pantomime, and other visual aids to comprehension. In recounting a trip abroad, for example, the teacher can bring a suitcase to class. In it are packed a passport, airline ticket folder, boarding passes, museum tickets, travel brochures, a large map, and other items. Instead of using the items merely to drill vocabulary, the teacher tells the story of the trip using the artifacts to illustrate the comments. What is said should be rephrased often, just as it might occur in a real conversation. Cognates should be written on the board; what looks like an English word may not sound like it in the target language. Students probably will not understand every word in the demonstration. The teacher can encourage them not to worry about this natural phenomenon but rather to relax and watch to see what is pulled out of the suitcase next. These demonstrations can be followed by comprehension questions that can be answered in one or a few words. The following are some examples:

A. Yes/No (also, True/False or Logical/Absurd)
   1. Did I go to Granada?
   2. Did I take the bus to Toledo?
   3. Did I visit the Museum of Ceramics?

B. Short Answer
   1. How did I get to Barcelona?
   2. What did I eat in Valencia?
   3. Whom did I see in Madrid?

C. Either/Or
   1. Did I arrive in June or July?
   2. Was the weather hot or cold?
   3. Did I travel alone or with friends?

Another comprehension-checking technique is to ask a student to be the "interpreter" for the class. After the teacher finishes the demonstration, the interpreter (or interpreters) must tell the gist of the story to other members of the class. The gisting technique is actually the goal of listening practice. It determines if students have understood and can relate the content to others.

Other interesting types of demonstrations include slide shows, filmstrips for which the teacher provides the commentary, and descriptions of charts, posters, maps, or transparencies. Many times teachers think of these activities as treats that should be saved for special occasions, but they can actually be incorporated into the lesson plan more frequently with good results.

Audio-Motor Unit

The audio-motor unit (Kalivoda, et al., 6) is a special type of demonstration that is very effective in teaching listening comprehension. The teacher prepares a script of about twenty sentences in the target language. The sentences should be centered around a single topic, such as "getting ready for class," and should contain new as well as already familiar vocabulary and structures. The sentences are then taped on a cassette, preferably by a native speaker. In class, the teacher plays the tape once while pantomiming the sentences. The tape is played a second time while students join the teacher in acting out the script. This step may be repeated over a series of several classes, if necessary, but many times students are ready to "solo" at this point. Finally, the tape is played and students pantomime the sentences alone. At this time, the teacher may want to make an informal check of comprehension and vocabulary by giving words and phrases in the target language and having students provide the English gist or translation. Because of the visual and motor impact of the activity, learners' attention and retention rates are usually high.

Show-and-Tell

There are many variations on the theme of show-and-tell that can be used to good advantage as listening practice in the second language classroom. Students themselves can do simple show-and-tell activities even during the first week of instruction. Many textbooks present greetings and introductions that can be taught to students by having them insert the appropriate personal information. They can then stand before the class and tell about themselves—their names, where they are from, what they study, where they work, where they live now, etc. These introductions may be used as points of departure for listening practice. To check comprehension, questions such as "Where is Sherri from?" "Where does Ben work?" and "Does Susan live in a dormitory?" may be asked. In another variation of show-and-tell, students can bring artifacts to class and tell about their significance. Pictures of friends and family members are also very good show-and-tell items.

Students as Question-Askers

Students need not be confined to the role of question-answerers. Guest speakers are excellent stimuli for giving students practice in both listening and asking questions. Inviting native speakers to your classes has a twofold purpose: it allows students to hear other dialects of the target language, and it provides a special occasion for listening practice.

After listening to a live demonstration or presentation, comprehension may be checked by having students, rather than the teacher, ask the questions. The nature of the questions will indicate how well the students comprehended the material. With beginning and intermediate students, native speakers must be instructed to use a visual component in their presentation. The visual component can take the form of pantomime, pictures, slides, or other aids to comprehension. Talking more slowly or loudly generally does not help students comprehend, but careful selection of vocabulary, rephrasing, and paraphrasing do.

Making Incomprehensible Input Comprehensible

Realistically, there are many times when we enter a conversation in midstream, have no experience with the topic, or simply cannot comprehend for whatever reason. At this point, it is tempting for learners to throw in the towel. By teaching them to produce the right kinds of questions, however, they may be able to turn this incomprehensible input into something understandable.[3] Below are some suggestions for this type of practice.

Attention getters

1. Pardon me.
2. One moment, please.
3. Uh (or whatever sound is appropriate for your target language and culture).

Probing questions and statements

1. What were you saying?
2. Did you say . . . (e.g., Did you say that there are twelve children in your family?).
3. Please repeat that.
4. I didn't understand what you said about . . . (e.g., the math course you are taking).
5. Squid? (Insert any unfamiliar vocabulary item that seems to be causing the lack of comprehension.)

Conclusion

Our ultimate goal in teaching listening should be to help students achieve a level of listening comprehension that will enable them to comprehend native speakers talking about familiar topics at a normal rate of speech. Because commercially prepared tape packages that accompany the major second language textbooks still provide primarily pattern and repetition drills, it is important that we dedicate a major part of our preparation and teaching time to the development of this important skill.

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Notes

1 The study was conducted by the author during the Winter 1985 Quarter at The Ohio State University.

2 A discussion of advance organizer techniques for reading appears in Medley (11).

3 Valdés has developed a number of learner strategies for making input comprehensible. See Long, et al. (10).

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